

VZCZCXYZ0002
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHZP #0789/01 2951643
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 221643Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0006
INFO RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS PANAMA 000789

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PM

SUBJECT: MARTINELLI'S APPROVAL RATING AT 86 PERCENT AFTER 100 DAYS IN OFFICE

Summary

¶11. (SBU) After 100 days in office, President Ricardo Martinelli's approval rating has reached historic levels. The question remains whether the numbers are the result of an optimistic interpretation of poll data by the press, or simply reflect the success of Martinelli's brand of presidential populism. Security issues continue to be of greatest concern to Panamanians, who have not seen any decrease in crime or violence since Martinelli took office. Despite this, a wholehearted endorsement of Martinelli by the Panamanian press leaves him strategically well positioned to move forward with his agenda. End summary.

The Honeymoon

¶12. (U) Lauded in the press as "the greatest honeymoon in the democratic history of the country," Martinelli won an approval rating of 85.9 percent for his first 100 days in office, according to a poll commissioned by Panama's leading daily La Prensa and performed by Unimer. Pollster Ipsos also gave Martinelli an 85.9 percent approval rating, while pollster Dichter and Neira went further, finding that Martinelli enjoyed 90.7 percent approval among those polled. According to both Dichter and Neira and Unimer, this level of popularity surpasses that achieved by Martinelli's three presidential predecessors, Martin Torrijos, Mireya Moscoso and Ernesto Perez Balladares. According to Dichter and Neira, in the first 100 days of their respective terms, President Perez received an 86.9 percent approval rating, while Presidents Moscoso and Torrijos garnered a lesser 70 percent. According to Unimer, in December of 1994, President Perez received an 81 percent approval rating, while Presidents Moscoso and Torrijos held 70 percent of public approval in their first 100 days.

Average is Enough

13. (SBU) Ipsos reported Martinelli's overall approval rating to be 85.9 percent, despite the fact that 49 percent of respondents rated his performance as only "average", with 40 percent rating it as "good" and nine percent as "very good". At first glance, Martinelli appeared to have fared better under the Unimer poll, where 74 percent rated his performance as "good" and 11.9 percent as "excellent." However, the Unimer question appears only to have allowed respondents to answer in black and white terms, giving no option to answer other than "excellent," "good," "bad," or "very bad," precluding a nuanced response. Detailed results from the Dichter and Neira poll are currently unavailable.

14. (SBU) According to the Unimer poll, 53.3 percent of respondents rated crime, violence and insecurity as the biggest problems confronting the country, the highest numbers since January, 2009. Despite their approval of Martinelli's performance overall, 69.8 percent nevertheless felt that the new administration had not succeeded in reducing violence or addressing the security problem, the issue of highest concern among those polled. Similarly, according to Ipsos, 75 percent of respondents rated the new administration's handling of the security problem as tepid, at best, with 44 percent finding it "average," 23 percent "bad," and eight percent "very bad."

Running With the Ball

15. (SBU) Despite public frustration with security, Martinelli appears to have garnered overwhelming support. According to the polls, he is more in favor now than at the time of his election, when he won 60 percent of the vote. A series of popular moves may be keeping his approval ratings sky high. According to IPSOS, the majority of Panamanians polled felt that Martinelli had either kept or would keep his campaign promises on a variety of popular measures, including his "100 for 70" pension program that gives a monthly stipend of USD 100 to Panamanians over seventy years old, his push to reduce the number of people on the government's payroll, and a program to give scholarships, books and equipment to public schools. Martinelli's assignment of a new director of the Office of Social Security - an institution historically rife with problems - and several high profile moves against corruption in the former government, including the incarceration of the former Minister of Education on criminal charges, have been widely approved. However, the high numbers may also have something to do with timing. Two of the polls were taken within days of his "100 Days" nationwide address, which may have caused a temporary surge in public opinion. A nuanced reading of poll results also appears to give Martinelli a less ringing endorsement than what was publicized in the press. Despite the post-election disarray of the opposition Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), it seems unlikely that roughly 30 percent of the 37 percent of voters who supported PRD candidate Balbina Herrera in the recent election now support Martinelli. Regardless of what the true opinions of the Panamanian public may be, Martinelli's overwhelming popularity has been vaunted by the media, giving him wide latitude to pursue his agenda.

Technical Data

¶6. (U) Dichter and Neira conducted 2,000 interviews nationally, excluding the difficult to reach Darien Province and the Ngobe Bugle autonomous region. Interviews were conducted from October 9 to 11, 2009. Ipsos conducted 1,200 interviews nationally of men and women between the ages of 18 and 60, in urban and semi-urban areas excluding the indigenous people's autonomous regions, the difficult to reach Darien Province and areas deemed too dangerous.

Interviews took place face-to-face in individuals' homes between September 18 and 21, 2009. The margin of error for the poll was estimated at +/- 2.8 percent with a confidence level of 95 percent. Unimer conducted 2,000 interviews nationally of men and women between the ages of 18 and 75, in urban and semi-urban areas, in proportion to the number registered to vote in the covered province. Interviews were conducted between October 6 and 9, 2009. No interviews were conducted in the indigenous people's autonomous regions or the difficult to reach Darien Province. The margin of error for the poll was estimated at +/- 2.8 percent with a confidence level of 95 percent.

STEPHENSON